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Anarchism in the Land of the Rising Sun (and falling Yen)

A Brief History of Anarchism in Japan

Workers Solidarity

October 1999

Today Japan brings to mind high tech corporations, stressed out primary school students and a gruelling work ethic that demands loyalty to the company. One hundred and thirty years ago it was a very different place, predominantly agricultural and ruled over by a feudal elite. In 1868, these rulers decided to industrialise the country and create a highly centralised state. For this reason, the Japanese experience of capitalism is different from that in many European countries.

Here, aristocrats were replaced (either gradually or by revolution) by a rising class of businessmen. There, the aristocrats became the new businessmen. The culture of feudalism wasn't rejected and replaced, rather it was remained and provided the background to the new society. This meant that Japan at the turn of the century was a country that was becoming more industrial and yet remained extremely conformist. It was in these difficult conditions that anarchism ideas first took hold in Japan.

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The movement was to be dramatically influenced by the world wars in which Japan played a leading part. Three phases are evident: from 1906–1911, from 1911–1936, from 1944–present day.

Ideas have to come from somewhere. In Japan anarchist ideas were first popularised by Kotoku Shusui. Born in a provincial town in 1871, he moved to Tokyo in his teens. His political ideas developed on the pages of a number of papers he wrote and edited. Though these early newspapers weren't anarchist, they were liberal enough to bring him to the notice of the authorities. He was imprisoned in 1904 for breaking one of the many draconian press laws. As it is for many, prison was to be his school.

There he read Kropotkin's 'Fields, Factories and Workshops'. In prison he also began to consider the role of the Emperor in Japanese society. Many socialists at the time, avoided criticising the Emperor, in contrast Kotoku began to see how the Emperor was at the centre of both capitalism and the power of the state in Japan.

Following his release from prison he emigrated to the USA. There he joined the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW, also known as the Wobblies), a syndicalist trade union, strongly influenced by anarchist ideas. In the US he had access to more anarchist literature, reading Kropotkin's 'The Conquest of Bread'.

On his return to Japan in 1906 he spoke to a large public meeting on the ideas he had developed while in the US. A number of articles then followed. "I hope" he wrote "that from now on the socialist movement will abandon its commitment to a parliamentary party and will adapt its method and policy to the direct action of the workers united as one".

In the following years the anarchist-communists concentrated on spreading information about anarchism, through the production of oral and written propaganda. Although the work they did was similar to work Irish anarchists do

today, the conditions they had to operate in were very much more difficult. Faced with continuous police harassment, some anarchists considered turning to more violent methods. In 1910 four of these were arrested following the discovery of bomb making equipment.

This was the opportunity the authorities were waiting for to comprehensively clamp down on dissent. Hundreds were taken into custody. Finally 26 were brought to trial. Though they were charged with plotting to kill the emperor, in reality they were being tried for having anarchist beliefs. All but two were sentenced to death. 12 had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, and 12, including Kotoku, were executed. Following his death, many activists fled into exile. Those that stayed faced repeated imprisonment.

Yet despite these exceptionally harsh conditions, the movement did not die. The end of the First World War brought a period of spiralling inflation, which led to rice riots in many towns and cities. The new industrial workers began to organise and labour disputes increased. The Russian Revolution caused intense debate in Japan, as elsewhere; how can we create a better society? What should that society look like? This flourishing of opinion was temporarily dimmed, following the tragic murders of two anarchists, Osugi Sakae and his partner Ito Noe.

In 1923, a major earthquake hit Japan. More than 90,000 people died. The state took advantage of the turmoil and hysteria that followed. The two anarchists, along with Osugi's six-year-old nephew were seized by a squad of military police and beaten to death. The brutality of the murder compelled some anarchists to seek revenge. Once again, anarchist attempts at retribution were met by state repression that struck indiscriminately.

However, all was not lost. Indeed anarchist organisations were growing as never before. In 1926 two nationwide federations of anarchists were formed. The following years were

characterised by intense debate between anarchist-communists and anarchist syndicalists. At issue was the central question as of what was the best method with which to build towards a revolution. Hand in hand with their theoretical discussions, these anarchists were active in struggles over wages and working conditions.

War however once more loomed on the horizon. As the state began to move towards external confrontation with Manchuria, it also began to silence internal opposition. A new wave of repression ensued. Although the anarchist movement adopted many strategies to survive, the state was determined to succeed. With the beginning of the Second World War, all anarchist organisations were forced to shut down. The anarchists themselves had to maintain a low profile, hiding their political ideals from public view.

Post-war, Japan was under the effective rule of the United States. Their political policy for the country see-sawed between trying to artificially create a ‘right’ and a ‘left’ political party, to trying to remove all left wing influences from politics. Heavy investment and a rapidly growing economy were accompanied by a clamp down on trade union autonomy. Although the anarchists re-grouped and re-organised, they found it difficult to flourish in these conditions.

The movement today is much smaller than before, and from Ireland it is difficult to find much English language information about them. No doubt they face many of the same problems that we do; how to show people that they don’t have to just make do, how to convince people that an alternative is possible and that they have power to create it.

Perhaps the economic turmoil that Japan is now experiencing will lead people to criticise and reject the current system. If that happens, hopefully Japanese anarchists will be able provide a vision of society based on freedom and equality, begin to rebuild the movement, so once more anarchist ideas have mass influence.